

Big victory for Japan's PM

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July 2016

Last Sunday the Japanese voters gave Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his coalition government a resounding victory. Voters had been called to renew half of the Upper House of the Japanese Parliament. Of a total of 121 seats up for grabs the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won 56 and its coalition party, the New Komeito, 14 seats. Together with the 76 seats of the ruling coalition that were not up for reelection the Abe government has now for the first time in a long time a firm control in the Upper House holding 135 seats of the total of 242 seats. As a result Prime Minister Abe, who is also the President of the LDP, commands a clear majority in both houses of Parliament. Already in December 2014 Abe had secured an overwhelming majority in the most recent elections to the Lower House. His coalition then gained 326 of the grand total of 475 seats.

The Japanese Parliament consists of two chambers. In the Upper House or House of Councillors members are elected for a term of six years, with every three years half of the seats coming up for reelection. The Lower House or House of Representatives is elected for four years. It is the prerogative of the Prime Minister to decide within this period about the election date. When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe decided to strengthen his parliamentary base in late 2014 he arranged for a snap poll with an early dissolution of the Lower House. Repeatedly, Abe has shown great skill in expanding his political power.

While Sunday's election results caused jubilation in the ruling coalition, they were devastating for the opposition. It is obvious that the splintered opposition has not recuperated since it was voted out of office in 2012. Before that under the leadership of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) the country had had a rare spell of the "permanent" ruling party, the LDP, sitting on the opposition benches. That experiment failed after three years and many voters saw the collapse of the DPJ-led government largely as self-inflicted, caused by unending internal quarrels and egotistical power squabbles.

The fact that since a long time the Prime Minister and his coalition have a secure majority in both houses of Parliament is of great political significance in many fields. First of all, the Prime Minister will take the latest poll as proof that he is on the right track with his economic policies that are known as "Abenomics". While many economists have serious doubts that Abe will be able to implement the promised structural reforms, and while many observers see strong headwinds for the long overdue revitalization of the Japanese economy, Japanese voters obviously are content with the current course. Whether this reflects approval or is simply the result of resignation is of course an open question. While for example in European countries uncertainties have led voters to leave traditional parties and join populist movements, the Japanese public obviously wants stability and no experiments.

The next national electoral test Prime Minister Abe will have to face, will be the general elections that latest in December 2018 will have to be fought. As Shinzo Abe has repeatedly proven to be a valuable vote winner there is no danger for him to face competition in the notoriously faction ridden LDP. The Prime Minister, therefore, has enough political space for major policy initiatives. One area of contention is the status of self-defense. Japan's constitution which was enacted in 1947 under American auspices and which has not been modified since then, contains an article that commits Japan if not to pacifism then to a very restricted usage of defense. It is no secret that Prime Minister Abe and a substantial part of his political supporters want to modify this article and normalize Japan's defense capabilities, enabling the country to project its military might beyond the confines of its territory and territorial waters, whenever national interests require it.

Any amendment of the constitution requires a qualified majority in the two Houses of Parliament before it can be submitted for general referendum by the people. After Sunday's elections it looks that Shinzo Abe and his allies have the necessary majorities to embark on the path to constitutional reform. Whether this will happen and what it will imply are still open questions. Of course, the opposition had been campaigning with dire predictions of warmongering by the government. Practically all forces in the opposition are set against any constitutional revision. On the other hand, it would be foolish to see all those Japanese who support Abe and want to abolish the article in the constitution that severely restricts Japan's defense capabilities, as right-wing nationalists. It is no secret that in recent times Japan has been rattled by the powerful resurgence of China. Furthermore, as the United States is facing a number of socio-economic and geopolitical challenges many Japanese want to reduce the dependence of their country on American defense. It still is unclear what steps the government will take in the near future but it is expected that soon enough we will get signals that indicate possible policy changes.

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